

Academic Writing of Teachers in Training: Analysis and Approach to Possible Solutions

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Abstract

The research focused on the analysis of difficulties related to academic writing from the information and results obtained from the study developed in the Faculty of Educational Sciences, Humanities and Technologies of the National University of Chimborazo in Riobamba, province of Chimborazo, whose population consisted of students from different careers with the objective of evaluating academic writing and identifying the difficulties presented by students. The study was carried out under a mixed approach in which descriptive, comparative and hermeneutic methods prevailed, and the research modalities were bibliographic, field and non-experimental, all with the purpose of designing a system of categories that will later serve as input for the strengthening of competencies, which may be assumed in the curricula of reading and writing training programs from an integral perspective, as well as from the implementation of a Writing Center for the application of shared methodologies that allow replacing the perspective of obligatory writing with epistemic writing.

Keywords: academicwriting, writing center, epistemic writing, teacher training

Introduction

Academic writing undoubtedly contains a specialized discourse according to its purpose. Its language has beyond the variants that are found in different disciplinary fields, a set of common features of vocabulary, syntax and grammar that make up its own style, whose main qualities are: precision, conciseness, clarity, in addition to a tendency to impersonality. As these considerations are often not assumed by students, a research was carried out to evaluate academic writing and identify the difficulties presented by students of the Faculty of

Education, Human Sciences and Technologies of the National University of Chimborazo, Riobamba, province of Chimborazo, which was developed under a mixed approach in which the descriptive, comparative, hermeneutic and descriptive methods prevailed as research modalities: bibliographic, field and non-experimental; all with the purpose of designing a system of categories that function as inputs to fulfill the responsibility of strengthening writing competencies that are difficult to reach without having completed reading processes and thus rethink how the problem is assumed from real proposals.

The selected population was made up of students of the Faculty of Education Sciences, but different samples were selected in the different phases of the research. As for the data collection techniques, the following were used: documentary review, observation, surveys and tests; which required the elaboration of the corresponding formats. Methods of analysis were used to understand the whole through a division that contributed to establish relationships; synthesis to unify the parts that were analyzed and establish characteristics and relationships; induction to formulate the system of categories; and deduction for the construction of the proposal and conclusions. However, it should be emphasized that since writing is a constant practice, it was treated from different aspects and the demand was expressed for a Writing Center for the application of shared methodologies that would make it possible to replace the perspective of obligatory writing with epistemic writing.

Theoretical references

Writing is undoubtedly one of the great advances of humanity, as a communicative process of permanence and conservation of history itself. Let us remember that it marks a before and after, and that it even allowed access to the memory of peoples and conglomerates; in addition to the passage from a particular culture to a globalized culture, to such an extent that what is not written or published simply does not exist.

The mere fact of writing has been surpassed by writing, because writing is complex, which implies the use of written codes to reach levels of significance, but to achieve this goal it is convenient to execute a textual production process in which correction is the priority, in order to control such varied aspects of substance and form, since even after publication, there is the possibility of finding errors.

When speaking of reading and writing, they are considered as processes with unique contexts that require cognitive exercise, both for the simplest and the most complex manifestations; since all of them require a preparation process. Thus, when focusing on writing, this process requires the mastery of regulations, knowledge and skills that are developed as practice develops. In this sense, Kozak (2014) refers, writing implies thinking, reviewing, since it is an activity that cannot come out of nowhere, because regardless of the text that needs to be produced, so preparation is involved.

Academic writing has generated a series of research on the difficulties that arise around it, especially in the process of learning to manage it, which is to maintain a policy of reading and writing, concomitant activities that are nurtured through a permanent practice; and that does not start from an undefined point but from a diagnosis of the situation in which these two pillars for learning are found. In fact, there are experiences of how this responsibility is approached in higher education centers “and it is the university that has to take on the task of

bringing young people closer to the approach of academic texts” (Castronovo, Zamudio and Picotto, 2012, p. 149).

Every written process corresponds to norms; much more the academic writing that implies several conceptions of how ideas should be presented; but fundamentally how to transmit them in order to disseminate knowledge. However, institutions and actors, far from assuming the duty, blame the previous levels when they face problems of reading and writing training; meanwhile, organizations and interested professionals try new methodologies and strategies with the objective of minimizing the gaps in favor of production. Therefore, the university must manage systematic processes to promote a continuous, serious and effective practice, so that mainly the students are those who, from the structures set for publication, can raise, support and project their ideas. For this reason, the mastery of the form allows to break with itself and perform a writing task that writing from autonomy or as Vallejo (2013) assumes “that our approach is from itself an expressive form itself” (Vallejo, 2013, p. 8).

Practices such as writing and reading should be permanent, voluntary and systematic; since these are not only found in school education at the beginning, but the same complexity demands their attention also at the university level (Méndez et al., 2016). However, the results point out that students are not always prepared to write, but they are required as part of their study activity, under the consideration that they know how to write, without reflecting if perhaps they reached the higher level by repeating, copying or transcribing texts without any reflection. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that spelling and grammar are important and have their own function in written expression, but they are only one component of all the knowledge that make up the written code and there are multiple elements at the time of communicating.

As stated in the words of Barthes (2011):

Writing in a utilitarian framework is an opportunity both to learn and to disseminate; for which it will undoubtedly require training beyond the so-called orthography, an element that for many professors seems indispensable, despite the fact that the writing activity deserves a whole load of linguistic and cultural knowledge, to become “an act of historical solidarity [...] it is precisely that commitment between a freedom and a memory” (p. 20).

In order not to speak of shortcomings, a euphemistic form is preferred: writing difficulties; emphasizing, moreover, that no one is exempt from mistakes when developing communicative acts, due to the influence of various factors: “difficulties are inherent to practice, to all readers and writers and, in order to know their nature and characteristics, it is necessary to know how they are presented along that continuum that is written discourse” (Mostacero, 2012, p. 74).

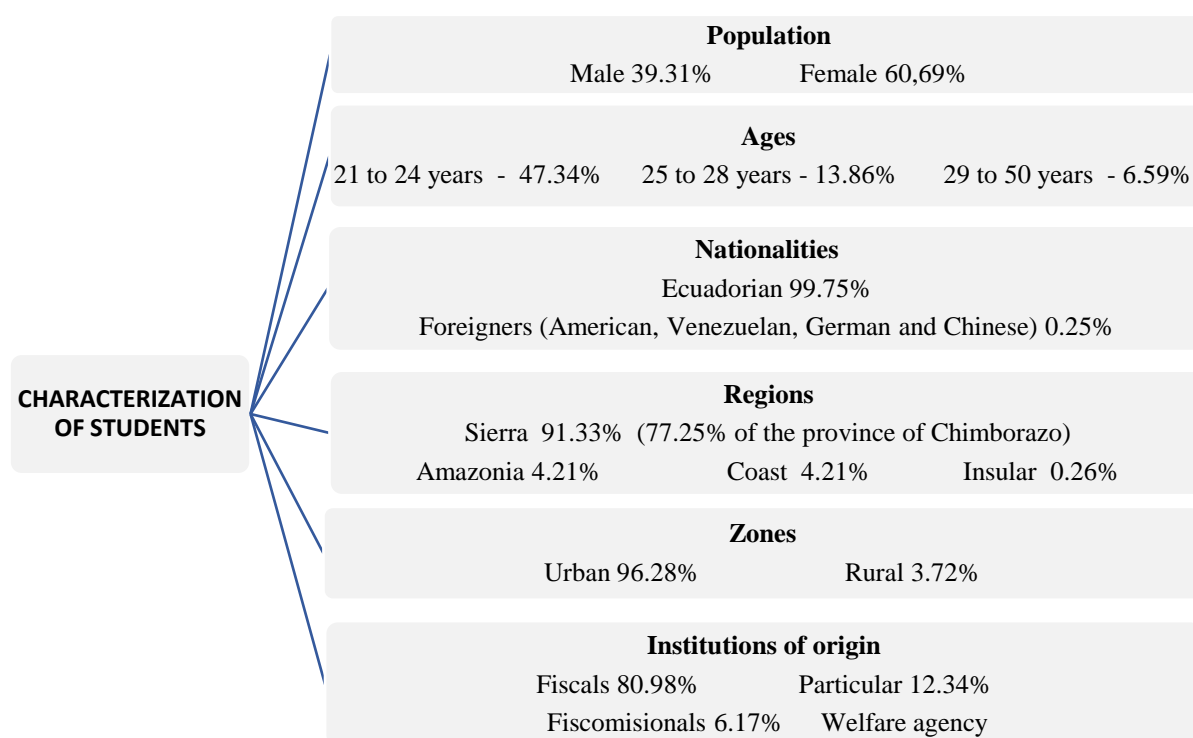
Context and findings

This research was conducted to detect the difficulties that students of the Faculty of Human Education Sciences and Technologies of the National University of Chimborazo presented when facing the task of writing academic texts. Therefore, the application of several techniques was required: survey directed to students of first and eighth semesters; a validated test for students of diverse semesters, conversational interviews and the revision of micro-

essays; tasks that served for the collection of difficulties, the typification of them and recommendations to minimize the sense of writing as a reproductive activity and reach the productive writing that derives from reading, the discipline of correction, and the urgent need to raise diverse alternatives to promote the comprehension of what is read and written.

The purpose of the research made it necessary to have a description of the students enrolled in the April-August 2016 semester; therefore, access to the information was required, which was granted after authorization from the Academic Vice Rectorate, so that it could be analyzed, tabulated and synthesized in order to achieve the characterization, the synthesis of which is presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1
Characterization of students



Based on the characterization, a survey was prepared for first and last semester students of different careers, which yielded information on deficiencies of substance and form; the affirmation of the scarce application of techniques, strategies or corrective measures to favor the mastery of writing; while the observation was valuable because it recorded the anxiety that many students felt when starting the text they were asked to write.

The survey addressed aspects related to writing and reading and it was gratifying to know that 73.75% of the first semester students and 89.62% of the eighth semester students stated that they enjoyed reading, although the first semester students recognized that the texts with greater comprehension difficulties are scientific texts with 63.38%; and the eighth semester students coincided in the degree of difficulty in this textual typology with 62.11%;

these assertions were corroborated when they admitted that they have difficulties in understanding scientific descriptions.

Regarding the difficulties encountered when writing types of texts, both eighth and first grade students agreed that it was complicated to elaborate syntheses, arguments, conceptualizations and exemplifications, mainly.

Having a diverse group of students, it sounded interesting to ask them why they wrote, but it was discouraging that 47.7% of both those who were beginning and those who were finishing their studies wrote to fulfill the assignments requested by their professors; and it was surprising that 45.76% of first semester students claimed to know the processes for writing, compared to an incipient 28.47% of students who were in their last semester.

Questions on textual properties and structures were also included, and in both cases the students who were beginning their studies were familiar with these topics, responses that were conditioned by a noteworthy element: in the first semester, one of the obligatory subjects in that curriculum was Language and Communication, while those in the eighth semester were taking professionalizing subjects. The survey closed with the question about the factor that they considered to influence the learning of writing, and in both groups, 66.26% said that it was reading.

With regard to the observation cards while the survey was being received, which was printed and therefore had to be answered by hand, it was detected that those who belonged to the Computer Science and Graphic Design careers showed some discomfort to write manually; while the groups that responded with greater predisposition were those who belonged to Basic Education, Languages and Exact Sciences.

In the following semester, 21 presidents of the different levels and careers were gathered and a new survey was administered to them; but this time a conversational interview was also held in order to corroborate their answers, which are summarized in Figure 2.

Figure 2
Presidents' survey summary



In a following research phase, based on the operationalization of the variables, a new survey was elaborated and it is worth mentioning that these instruments were validated by a national expert and three international experts, and that they allowed the triangulation to be carried out, because although it is true that the students in the survey considered that indications on academic writing are socialized. Processes linked to the production of texts are developed and that the teachers promoted the production of academic writing, in the test, the levels related to the writing of texts, correction conditions, aptitude to identify academic texts or to revise them, did not demonstrate the statements provided in the questions related to the work of their teachers, but they corresponded to the final answers on the level of language proficiency, spelling, semantic precision, syntax, since little understanding of such concepts was perceived.

The students accept having received guidance and clear indications; they assume that their works were reviewed in an integral manner and through instruments, because they consider that there are spaces and times in class for writing and they even affirm that they self-evaluate, a condition that is possible thanks to the fact that sometimes they resort to self-

education. They also consider that academic writing is a requirement for professional performance, for scientific production, for the dissemination of knowledge and wisdom, while they assume that publication and dissemination grant social and academic prestige. In contrast, during the individual and group interviews, it was stated that there is a lack of writing practice, that they still feel insecure when writing texts, that the scarce reading and the little investigative sense make writing difficult.

They confirm that the communicative intention is perceived in their works, that they use data related to the central fact, that they substantiate ideas, use reliable sources, present contributions and that the interpretations are consistent. This, in concomitance with the application of processes to produce texts, but they affirm that the final versions are not disseminated or published, and in the interviews, according to the responses recorded, neither the drafts nor the finished text were always revised in stages.

Among the difficulties rated as high were: the planning stage, publication as a critical moment in academic production, problems of cohesion, coherence, adequacy, concordance; lack of knowledge of textual structures, organization of ideas, sentence construction, paragraphs, identification of intertextualities, unintentional plagiarism, carelessness in stating sources, self-plagiarism and lexical poverty.

One of the most useful techniques was the conversational interview outside the university space, and above all without them feeling pressured to consider that any information recorded has a connection with the institutional recategorization; for this reason, the findings are condensed in Table 1.

Table 1:
Interview technical data sheet

TECHNICAL SHEET OF THE INTERVIEW
<p>INTERVIEWER: Genoveva Ponce Naranjo VENUE: cafeteria near the Faculty of Education Sciences TECHNIQUE: semi-structured group interviews INTERVIEWED: The group was made up of 10 students from different careers of the Faculty of Education Sciences. Graphic Design (2), Social Sciences (2), Educational Psychology (1), Elementary Education (1), Kindergarten (1), Exact Sciences (1), Sciences: Biology (1), Languages (1) CONTEXTUAL DATA: Students of Ecuadorian nationality, whose ages ranged from 18 to 23 years, from the provinces of: Chimborazo, Esmeraldas, Tungurahua, El Oro, Cotopaxi, Morona Santiago and Pastaza and a student of Chinese nationality who has been living in the country since she was 9 months old. SUMMARY OF THE INTERVIEW: In relation to academic writing They expressed: “it is a piece of writing from one student to another student”, “it is the work sent to us by the teachers”, “it is the writing so that the teachers can evaluate us”.</p>

Common practice texts

Essays, reports and projects were the texts mentioned, although it was interesting to hear the response of a Graphic Design student who gave less importance to academic texts because in her career “communication is more visual, because perhaps we have understood that form is more important than substance”.

How academic writing is oriented

This topic allowed the participation of all; here are their expressions: “They send you but do not inform you of the objectives or intentions”, “it is directed through readings and writing academic texts such as essays, but we need a guide or someone to teach us specifically how to write, because although I had a teacher who encouraged practice, not only a teacher can make you perfect yourself; because all teachers must set an example, be able to present an argument, a critique”. They believe that “they want to read their professors” and want them to advise them “because the help they give, as far as we know, is when they advise theses in which they are tutors”.

The students said that they are sent essays, especially essays, but “they are proposed without considering previous knowledge; thus, we delivered the requested length and when the work was returned to us it only contained the grade without adding any explanation”; and perhaps the most common recommendations are “to take care of the spelling and that the structure be in accordance with what was requested”; while they perceived that “most professors focus more on spelling”.

They state that they have problems with writing but do not ask their teachers for help. because “there is mistrust of teachers because sometimes we ask questions and not all teachers know how to answer”, so “the difficulties remain because even though the semesters go by, the teachers are still dealing with a yes or no answer; therefore, the doubts have not been cleared up; That is why I believe that when a student begins his or her university career, he or she still has in mind the learning about language that he or she received during the basic cycle and high school, but in the university there is not that sequence”; while one student emphasized that “the difficulties are not reduced because the students are not concerned about researching, about seeking information”; therefore, when they are asked to do academic work, they get angry; although a key factor is the topic, “because if it is not interesting, it is boring”.

Teacher support

Although the research is aimed at evaluating the academic writing of students, the importance of the teacher in the practice of writing emerged; and suddenly they said: “Teachers do not always help, because although there is communication with the teacher, if one asks or insists on the doubt, many of them are rude.”; “when they correct texts, if we ask questions about what was delivered and graded, they are not always patient with us”; “there is not always trust with the teacher”; “many times they cannot help us because even though they give us some trust, they have instilled in us a “respect” for the teacher and we are wary of asking.”

About writing processes

The informants agreed on “the importance of selecting the topic” or “planning”, but the expression of an informant who stated: “I know I should plan, but I don't always do it”

was sincere; another participant very confidently stated: “you have to think about the text, the context, the target audience”; they also highlighted the need to “choose the ideas well”; more in relation to the correction of the text, although one of them emphasized that “at least three times are required”, the others, even a little embarrassed acknowledged that they do not always correct.

On textual characteristics

This point generated varied answers: “The sense that it is developing a specific topic”; “when it is already understood”, “when the ideas are well developed”; “if there is enough coherence in the writing”; “if it has cohesion and coherence”, “the cohesion when another reads our text” and the “coherence through connectors” (which gave way to a conjecture: “they have heard the terms, but they cannot differentiate them or explain them clearly”); also one of the participants explained that “the text has acceptance when the other reads and understands; because we also have to think about the addressee that we do not know”.

About intellectual property

A valuable element in academic production is intellectual property, which is often not assumed with the necessary responsibility. Some students affirm that there are some professors who emphasize this aspect; another affirms “we do not always respect and the professors only sometimes discover us”; also “it is applied in the bibliography”; “there are professors who do value the fact that we respect intellectual property”.

Aspect that should be evaluated by teachers in written assignments

They stated: “I think it is good that they evaluate respect for intellectual property and not only spelling, because, although it is important, it cannot represent 90% of the grade of a text”, “compliance with the structure”; “that the text is in accordance with the context”; “coherence, cohesion, logical sense, which is what matters most”, “the sense of what is written”.

Anecdotes related to academic writing

With spontaneity each informant narrated interesting episodes:

- “When I got to first semester, I had no idea what an essay was, I must be honest; my classmates who had just graduated showed more competence in the subject than me who started this career after 7 years of having finished my Bachelor's Degree; and the real problem was not that I did not understand, but that I did not ask either, that was the mistake, because I was ashamed of being the oldest in the course and not knowing the subject.”

-When I was in Leveling, a teacher sent an essay on Psychology and as I had no computer I decided to do it an hour before in a computer center, but when the power went out I lost the work; and when the service was resumed there were only fifteen minutes left, so I made a “cut and paste” and I managed to deliver it to the teacher. Of course, I imagined a disastrous grade, but to my surprise I got a 10/10, while in the previous essays in which I even stayed awake to get a good grade, I barely got a 5/10; and that seemed illogical to me. When I went to ask for an explanation for the 5/10, the professor told me that he didn't have time and that he should continue with the syllabus. The problem is that he graded according to his emotional state or his time

availability”.

- “One time I asked the teacher to review the introduction to my paper and he readily agreed, but after a couple of days had passed, he assessed it as wrong.”

- “Many times, the work that a student does is plagiarized, but the surprising thing is that the author is assigned a low grade (in my case, I was the author) and the one who copied got a high grade, even without realizing the copy; that is why I think teachers should know their students better so they can identify who is writing the texts.”

- A group writing experience was the realization of the Proyecto Integrador de Saberes when I was in Leveling; a project that although it had to be elaborated by a team, I had to assume it alone; that is why I approached the teacher who requested it for the revision and he told me that everything was fine; But the next day, which corresponded to the final delivery, the teacher pointed out that everything was wrong and scratched it completely with the pen on all the sheets, like crazy; so I was shocked and when I asked him reasons, he told me that nothing was according to what was requested; given the facts I decided not to change anything because for me it was really fine; so without further ado I printed it again and gave it to the teacher, he reviewed it and told me: - “Yes, yes, yes, yes, it's fine, I'll give you the grade”. In this case nothing made sense; it is confusing that one day they tell you yes and another day they tell you no and the other day they tell you - “yes, I will grade you and give you a 10.” “I sincerely believe that not even the professor knew what he was doing, so how is the student going to know what he is doing, because not even the professor knows how to explain what is right or what is wrong; then, one as a student will not be able to do anything.

- “I once did an essay that took me a week and I got a 6/10, the second one I did in a hurry the night before the submission, I thought I would achieve a 2/10, but to my surprise I got a 9/10, I didn't understand why.”

-I had a very interesting teacher, who corrected my work, she was very kind and willing to help. She attended me in her office and gave me many suggestions with which I could make my essay better; because she gave me reasons that helped me to improve my work, of course I got an 8/10, but it was my effort”.

All the instruments and, objectively, the writing tests based on the preparation of short essays, the review of reports and the reading of undergraduate research projects, made it possible to obtain the final table on academic difficulties, summarized in Annex 1.

Proposal

Writing is a social, cultural and experiential fact because, directly or indirectly, whoever writes is reflected through the text because, although there is always an antecedent, the way of perceiving information, processing it and re-signifying it carries the nuance of his experience and cognitive capacity. “Writing is making up for lost time. It is to build an ideal future, like Robinson's on his island: to the measure of each one of us” (Rubiano, 2006, p. 43). It is the possibility of showing to the other that reserve of knowledge and knowledges that are built in an evolved way.

Difficulties related to writing are not limited to academic writing, but also to creative writing. The student faces fears and doubts that many times are not overcome during the different years of schooling, and are accentuated when they arrive at the university due to the lack of tools, strategies and knowledge related to the writing of texts; therefore, based on the results of the research and the didactic experience, a proposal is made that is summarized in the following points:

1. Academic literacy program

Direct support for writing implies the strengthening of reading at all levels, which is why the curriculum must guarantee the necessary conditions beyond the incorporation of a specific subject, in order to eliminate recurrent complaints by creating spaces for a systematic practice of reading and writing that generates an authentic inclination for these macro-disabilities, otherwise, “to the incompetences that the bachelor brings linked to the first literacy, are added the difficulties to read, interpret and construct genres that vary from one discipline to another” (Mostacero, p. 68). 68).

The fundamental pillar of the program should be the creation of the Writing Center with the intervention of researchers, teachers and students, in order to create a learning culture in which the activities are “developed jointly between a “partner teacher” of the subject, who is a language teacher specialized in reading and writing, and the teachers responsible for the different subjects. Together they plan the tasks of reading and writing texts”, (Laco et al., 2012, p.4) because the academic culture is not homogeneous. Another purpose aims at promoting different genres, styles and models in order to improve student written production through tutorial work that encourages research towards new proposals for the improvement of writing.

2. Working under slogans

Teachers must work under multiple slogans linked to objectives, competencies, expected results of each subject and at the same time connect with the others, in order to correspond to the educational, pedagogical and institutional model that is epistemologically based on the paradigm of complexity; therefore, the reading and writing activities will not be taken as recipes but from the possibilities of the new, the unexpected with clear parameters, “for example, if the writing must be destined to someone with whom one has a symmetrical or asymmetrical relationship - it will not give rise to the evaluation of the adequate representation of the receiver in the text” (Atorresi, 2005). Furthermore, the guidelines in the academic field are constituted in the norms that a journal, publishing house, institution or organization establishes, even as requirements for the text to reach the conditions for publication.

3. Strengthen writing processes

There are several writing processes, but basically the steps suggested by Carriazo and Martínez (2012) would be developed.

Planning: to define what the text is going to be written for, to whom it is addressed, to define the type of text, language level and communicative intention, in order to trigger possible ideas for each part of the text.

First writing or textualization: it will consist of a first draft of the text in which the ideas proposed are developed, but at the same time the revision is not lost sight of.

Revision and editing: this can be done as many times as deemed necessary in order to refine the text, and grids, checklists, evaluation rubrics and other instruments would be useful for this purpose. In addition, individual and collective strategies can be incorporated.

Publication: the text delivered to the addressee requires a response from the addressee. Only when the author receives a response, or the text takes effect, can the work that began with the problem or need at the beginning of the process be concluded.

4. Consistent evaluations

Every evaluation deserves a conscious process well thought out and with the intention of determining the changes in relation to what has been learned, which favors an analysis of the formative actions for the achievement of a purpose. In the case of writing, this should become a competence, therefore it is necessary to discard that spelling is the main point of review or the main weight of the grade; suggesting to consider various aspects in an integral way, under the question “what use can have a writing orthographically impeccable, but composed of confusing sentences, in which grammatical subjects are lost, concordances are violated, ambiguities are produced, all of which hinders comprehension?” (Morales, 2004, p. 40).

It is necessary to strengthen teachers' responsibility for the evaluation of writing and reading, so that they lose their reproductive sense and that, under the transdisciplinary and complex model of Unach, it becomes a joint work of elaboration of texts, both daily, academic and creative, to undertake research on didactic processes related to textual production.

5. Free spaces

Writing cannot be a merely academic activity, but a practice for personal life, so the anxiety and uncertainty of the writer must be reduced, because “several experiments approve that there is a close correlation between the degree of distress of the individual and the success in code acquisition. In general, states of distress, emotional instability or inner conflicts do not favor acquisition at all” (Cassany, 1989, p. 78).

The idea is to create a reading and writing link between peers: teachers-teachers, students-students; but at the same time a heterogeneous work: teachers-students, leading students-novice students, researchers-students; who can work on different genres and topics to combat the mere reproduction of knowledge through arguments or dialogic practices to achieve the exchange of knowledge.

6. Writing as a line of research

Based on the experiences at the Writing Center and the curricular practice focused on reading and writing as a shared responsibility, a line of research can be created on university situations, methodologies, systematizations and situations that can be approached from different focuses for the planning of research projects and proposals to nurture a taste for reading, the satisfaction of writing and the development of cognitive abilities for learning and the development of communicative skills, since the act of writing implies the execution of methodological processes and sub-processes that should not be considered “as stages in time, but rather as great tasks, indissolubly articulated to the act of textual creation: the writer's

mind conceives, generates, elaborates, organizes, composes, drafts, revises and reworks, without sharp divisions in time” (Niño, 2012).

Conclusions

The students of the School of Education Sciences present writing difficulties that are evidenced through their academic works, which are not always reviewed during the construction process and not always thoroughly evaluated in their final version, conditions that limit the dissemination and publication of student texts; results that were achieved thanks to the triangulation of various data collection techniques.

Writing should not be an imposed task in order to achieve a grade, but a didactic and social opportunity for scientific production and dissemination in academic cooperation among peers and also in a heterogeneous way in which a consistent evaluation that implies the execution of a systematic process should prevail in order to avoid the limited way of considering spelling as a nineteenth-century recommendation.

The strengthening of writing skills requires the implementation of institutional policies, both curricular and extracurricular, so that this responsibility does not fall on language teachers, but on a multidisciplinary and transdisciplinary work in which teachers contribute from their various specializations because academic writing is not unique.

The implementation of the Writing Center for academic literacy is an urgent proposal to change the perspective of a compulsory writing for an epistemic writing that also allows working on a new line of research.

The potentiation of reading promotes writing, under the consideration that the best writers perform acts of persistence, of commitment to composition, because they carry out a permanent search, since they are those who “write more drafts, those who correct and revise each fragment, those who elaborate the text meticulously, those who are not lazy to redo the writing over and over again” (Domínguez, 2003, p. 103).

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